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AUTHOR Uchmanowicz, Pauline
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ABSTRACT

When a graduate student at the University of Rhode Island was asked to take a seminar at the University of New Hampshire, she experienced a major disjunction between her theoretical perspective and that of the other students and the professor. The seminar, "History of Rhetoric and Composition," was to evolve into a book narrating 40 years of writing instruction in the United States. Week after week, members of the seminar wrote reviews of research at a hyper-kinetic speed, the idea being to write as much as possible about a selected figure, theme or theory surrounding "the writing process movement." This graduate found herself thinking of University of New Hampshire as a haven for romantic-expressive writing pedagogies. Having read Althusser, Foucault, and Audre Lorde, she wanted to challenge the assumptions of "creative determinism" and "original voice." Little or no discussion followed collective reviews of her work (except the professor would tell her to "narratize"). When she tried unsuccessfully to introduce theory, she did not receive satisfactory responses. A companion malfunction to the identity politics elements of this story concerns what could be called "techno rhetoric," a trope for understanding the process of (re)creating language and subjectivity with the aid of advanced reproduction and distribution methods, from lap top to satellite dish; the term also describes the duplicating, cutting, pasting and recording inherent to this research project, which finally failed after 12 months. (TB)

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ED 376 465

Techno Rhetoric: Text Production in a Collaborative Process

I want to tell you a story about a course taught by an instructor who quoting Mina Shaughnessy told me, "I see *one* thing you can't do: write narrative." His observation pointed to writing composition history; for students enrolled in his graduate seminar, "History of Rhetoric and Composition," needed to do that well in order to narrate forty years of writing instruction in the United States, a book-length project we undertook with him calling ourselves the "Beal Group" (as a student good at naming named us).[1] Focusing on the experimental manuscript we tried to create, my story—within many possible stories about the collaborative production of knowledge—concerns postmodern identity and textual politics.

Like J. D. Salinger's "A Perfect Day for Bananafish," my tale begins with a telephone call and ends with a suicide, though the initial setting is hardly a vacation hotel in the late 1940s, but rather a "prison cell" in Providence, Rhode Island, early in the winter of 1992; the slaying involves not a fictional human, but (*pace* Barthes, Foucault and "The Death of the Author") the murder of over 500 pages of computer-generated documents. My complicity in the events leading up to this collaborative fatality began one December evening, as, chained to the labor of my Ph.D. dissertation and eager for any distraction, I quieted the telephone on the second ring.

The voice of my major professor buzzed in my ear: "How would you like to take a course in composition history next semester at the University of New Hampshire under a New England Land Grant Exchange Program?"

He seemed to have forgotten that the "contract" out on my own program of studies had been paid in full; writing a cultural studies dissertation and planning on a June graduation from the University of Rhode Island, I hardly felt the need for another composition course. "I'll think about it," I told him, promptly deleting the conversation from my memory files as if commanded by his clicking phone.

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But a month later he called back, saying, "Now that I know what the course is about I'm convinced—" I let my mind finish the rest of the sentence, "you don't have to do it," even while my ears registered his words, "it's a great opportunity. So, do you want to go up?"

The punch-line to this part of the story is of course: when your major professor wants you to do something you do it. "Give me the directions to UNH," I said.

Three days later, already two weeks into the semester, I presented myself to the UNH professor in his office, where he tapped away at a computer like a ragtime piano player. Lifting his left hand from the key board, he reached over to shake my right one, a grasp that reminded me of children forming a circle game on a playground. Then he gave me a brief run-down on the course and told me how to find the seminar room.

Drenched with sunlight, one large table filled up the space where the Beal Group would spend every Wednesday for the next three months. I sat down facing the door, feeling cozy, and watched the other students file in. "You must be a URI person," one said. Another who knew me greeted me enthusiastically. I sensed friendly yet serious minds. When the professor arrived, he made a long rotation around the seminar table and seated himself beside me, a gesture that I took as welcoming and kind. These six people provided me with an immediate sense of acceptance as a person, but during the next few months I would have to earn acceptance as a scholar; my work would serve as textual reflection on the entire English department at URI, as well as on my major professor, who also expected me to make him "look good" in the eyes of his colleague.

Looking good in this course turned out to mean writing reviews of research at a hyper kinetic speed, the idea being to write as much as possible, week after week, about a selected figure, theme or theory surrounding "the writing process movement." Later in the course, it meant trading off computer disks, doing "second passes" on subjects, and sometimes jumbling up information from younger generations of text. We *tried* to look good using a similar technique to create rough book chapters, this time experiencing the

collaborative process by working in teams. As a weak writer I enjoyed this textual alchemy, particularly when paired with other collaborators wise with the magic of narrative.

But others in the class had begun it in protest; perhaps without knowing that the skeptic often makes the best magician, they wanted to research independently, write individual chapters, and *Abracadabra* "pull off" a book. These early considerations of "voice" and "independence" match up with my first clues that institutional philosophies about how knowledge is made might stall our collaborative process. For example, in my own institutionally deposed position, I found myself thinking of the University of New Hampshire as a haven for romantic-expressive writing pedagogies. After all, Donald Murray was a noted dignitary, and people there seemed to pledge allegiance to individual "voice." I called myself an aetheist before this credo, despite the fact that on the screen of my memory, I could scroll back and watch the insertion point stutter on a former aspect of my institutional identity in creative writing workshops, where indeed "voice" was to "narrative," what "gifts of the holy ghost" are to the "glorious mysteries of the rosary."[2] But at the time of the UNH course, I was reading Althusser, Foucault, Audre Lorde and others, and wanted to challenge the assumptions of "creative determinism," of "original voice," of something we were calling "the process movement."

Not surprisingly, in the early weeks of that composition history course, little or no discussion followed collective reviews of my work, (except the teacher would tell me to "narratize"). When I tried unsuccessfully to introduce theory into our discussions, my comments generally met with silence. In one session, I challenged the idea of "voice" on the most primary of levels—insisting it were neither "gift" nor "blue print," but "always already" institutionally constructed by rules of English grammar, or by the idea of the critic, the creative and the non-fiction writer. I concluded, therefore, that a human name on a computer print out meant nothing in relation to its contents. Answering this outcry

in a subsequent session, a romantic-expressive type said simply of my sample: "It sounds like you wrote it"; he might as well have said: "You can't write narrative."

To off-set my litany of reasons for wanting to quit the UNH seminar, for weeks I walked around sighing: "Now I know what a radical, right-wing student in one of the classes I teach feels like."

After one particularly trying class I chased down the instructor in the hall way. "Excuse me, professor," I said. "But do you think I should stay in the course?"

"Yes," he answered. "But you'll have to empty your head of all that epistemology."

In essence, he told me to forget all that I had studied in my doctoral program up until that point. For my course work had trained me to criticize and challenge teachers, texts and ideas; to look for holes in arguments, occupy these critical spaces, look for ways out and ways to move beyond them. The process of writing disciplinary history seemed to be asking me to ascend or descend to an alternate level of academic consciousness. Yet I want to believe that my presence in the Beal Group forced critiques—grounded in cultural studies or postmodern theory—that *shifted* the direction of the project towards stronger considerations of gender, race and class structures, even while it helped undermine the collaborative, since altered or alternate agendas ultimately pushed the scope of the book beyond workable limits.

No doubt at times each of us also was guilty of the recidivist crime of "present absence," a fixed, philosophical position that simultaneously processes and dismisses structures of knowledge when these do not correlate usefully with its own. And yet, though conflicting ideas did lead to short-circuits in the collaborative, the Beal Group needed to travel both the power line of "narrative" and the power of line of "theory" to fuel our destination: the kind of composition history we were intending to write with both camps agreeing to collapse composing boundaries, for example, by attempting to shatter the mythos of "independent voice." Our project also crossed disciplinary

boundaries, engaging not only *composition studies*, "the processes through which knowledge becomes communicable" (Harkin and Schilb 5), but also *cultural studies*, "the ways social formations and practices shape consciousness, and [how] this shaping is mediated by language and situated in concrete historical conditions" (Berlin 101). In other words, the tension between identity "communicable" as narrative, and identity "shaped and mediated" by language became an igniting force in the group, raising the voltage of many a discussion.

A companion malfunction to the identity politics element in this story concerns what I shall "techno rhetoric,"[3] a concept that began to take shape in my consciousness one evening before a Beal Group class as, watching a movie on cable in the concrete historical conditions of a New England living room, I was startled at the poignancy of a service announcement accompanying a scrambled image that appeared on the television monitor: "Satellite operators experiencing interference your Pulsar co-ordinates should be tuned to Alpha B, Triton 7." For this electronic message challenged me to question in what ways URI and UNH signals might be technologically estranged. Soon after, I detected that not only the matter of how we *exchanged* or *stored* our collaborative knowledge in our brain cells, but also the matter of how we *assembled* our collective knowledge in print undoubtedly contributed to our eventual labor crash. For our method involved a recursive postmodern process I began to define in that class as "technical rhetoric," a way of creating texts and producing knowledge that relies on technology. As a trope for understanding the process of (re)creating language or subjectivity with the aid of advanced reproduction and distribution methods—from lap top to satellite dish—"techno rhetoric" also describes the language in which we mediate this social construct (e.g., duplicating, cutting, pasting, recording). Meanwhile, within the activities of "techno rhetoric," each self-identified "specialist" operates as a sub-particle—necessary for creating a collective image of a whole culture—by mediating all the discursive technologies connected to (re)producing her own identity—be it "writing teacher" or

"postmodern theorist"—and by circulating meta-languages, master figures and genre-specific images.

Acting as human archives, we embraced "techno rhetoric" in the Beal Group as we read, photocopied, interviewed and transcribed; operating miniature language labs, we copied, downloaded, transferred, cut or pasted information along electronic highways. In the final analysis, perhaps this method of technological pastiche remains at odds with writing narrative?

A related glitch in the breakdown of our collaborative process occurred as the history of rhetoric and composition course neared its institutional end. The professor expected people to automatically "shift gears"—from "archivist" to "theorist," from "techno rhetorician" to "human subject"—when we needed to "theorize" how to bricolage our narrative pieces into a seamless story; we were under-prepared to do it. Indeed, by that point, the book ends of "narrative" and "theory" in this tale barely had energy to jointly wish for the proverbial waving of the magic wand: "Poof! Your collective knowledge is a manuscript." My own attitude about the possible completion of the project wavered somewhere between "not-a-chance" and the attitude described by the following lines from Bill Knott's poem, "Reading the Gaps":

> Later, in the restaurant as usual I dip the
> wine-list into a glass of water and voila it's
> chablis because of course miracles are
> common now whereas the latter hope of living
> to read tomorrow today's lacunae isn't. (lines 25-29)

The "always already" textual gaps in any disciplinary history notwithstanding, in the time-honored manner of the fabled fairy godmother, quixotically, I continue to believe that some semblance of a collective "voice" might have emerged from our process, if only we had had more breath to sustain the life of it.

Alas, when the professor finally did kill the project in its twelfth month, he did so technologically. We each received a computerized statement reading: "Given all else we have to do, it's just not realistic to assume we can write our book, too"; I admit to human disappointment over this mechanical missive.

Though many weeks during the winter and spring of 1993, I drove *away* from the mountains of New Hampshire towards the flat lands of Rhode Island, quoting Emily Dickinson, "cry with joy Pompeii!/To the Hills return!," I learned to enjoy that history of composition class I took under a cooperative exchange program a great deal. Indeed, I came to relish moments when my status as an institutional "outsider" with borrowed "insider" status allowed me to voice opinions that others in our academic grove (Aisenberg and Harrington) could never have dreamed of voicing, no matter how so-called egalitarian the professor. Since I didn't need the course credit, or to go through the UNH program, and since the professor had virtually no institutional authority over me, I freewheeled cynicism, making remarks such as: "I don't think the process movement even exists. I think this is a bunch of bull shit." Or: "All I want out of this is a job. Look, I *need* a letter of recommendation from this teacher." Or, speaking directly to the teacher: "You're a dictator."

But the teacher was actually a nice and caring individual who did write me a letter of recommendation. I did experience what I felt were successful collaborations with several members of the class, and I believe we all have the basis for several decent individual or co-authored articles among us. Needless to say, I learned a tremendous amount about composition history in the course as well, and largely from research produced by scholars in our class. A dissertation chapter, conference papers and journal articles also personally came to life for me as a direct result of doing graduate work with people at the University of New Hampshire.

And because of, or maybe despite the tension between narrative, identity and textual production, I believe that disciplinary histories may be created in the manner of the UNH seminar described in this story. For my part, I'd like to teach an undergraduate writing course in which students write a first draft of a first paper, and spend the rest of the semester rewriting papers that they receive in an endless collaborative "swap." Since I found a certain academic freedom in cross-institutional exchanges with the Beal Group, I'd like to see more and more students explore this collaborative territory. The cyberspace of our presently developing electronic media continues to network us for these kinds of exchanges so that texts people create in our twenty-first century classrooms should continue to restructure institutional boundaries mediating the production of knowledge.

At this point, some denouement, preferably some definitive, memorable line like: "It seems we use narrative and tell stories finally because we want to believe that we are not texts, but humans—merely compositionists mediating our identities through competing theories, trying to scribble our way to disciplinary fame," probably should mark the impending close of my story.

And here I should add a compulsory "the end," but will instead pull the curtain with a casting call:

> Auditions for academicians to appear as themselves, or as atavistic variations of process pedagogues, who revise lifeless chapters, and, using an alchemical potion called *collaboration* keep the conversation alive with their own stories.

Notes

1. "The Beal Group" derives from the name of a major contributor to a special rhetoric and composition collection at the University of New Hampshire library.

2. Bill Knott, my former poetry writing teacher whose poem I quote in this essay, once frantically asked me during an individual conference about my work, "Why do you bring me *narrative*?" The complete title of the manuscript from which I borrow his lines is *According to a Story in Herodotus, BECOS [Phrygian for "Bread"] Was the First Word Spoken by the Human Race. . . .*

3. If, as a colleague challenges this narrative, the concept of "techno rhetoric" seems needlessly ironic—at odds with the serious fiber of identity politics—I remind the reader that there is no ethos in trope; rhetoric is by nature ironic, which is why we can love Nietzsche's wry assessment of metaphors mediating human nature in *The Genealogy of Morals.*

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